

The Influence of Power Structures in Modern Central Asian Steppe States on Foreign Policy — A Case Study of the Diplomatic Activities of Kalmyk Khanate and the Junior jüz of Kazakh Khanate in the 18th Century

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Abstract. The social structure, division of political power, and operational mechanisms of modern Central Asian steppe states, dominated by nomadic peoples, are closely related to their foreign policy concepts and the formulation of diplomatic strategies. This paper uses a comparative case study method, focusing on Kalmyk Khanate and the Junior jüz of Kazakh Khanate in the 17th and 18th centuries. Through a comparative analysis of the power structures of these two states and their transformations, the study explores the causal relationship between the characteristics of state power structures and the formulation of foreign policy. The study finds that the internal cohesion formed by the social power structure of steppe states affects their military strength, the legitimacy of the ruler's power, and the orientation of social demands, which represent the balance between "interest" and "independence" —important conditions for the stable operation of a nomadic society— thus exert practical influence on diplomatic concepts and policies.

Keywords: Modern Central Asia, Steppe States, Nomadic Societies, Multiple Loyalties, Protectorates.

1. Introduction

Steppe states that existed throughout the history of the Eurasian continent, such as the Mongol Empire and the Timurid Empire in the 14th and 15th centuries, the Bukhara Khanate, the Kazakh Khanate, and the Oirat Mongols in the 16th and 17th centuries, all played pivotal roles in the historical development of modern Asia. The political and military activities among these states had a significant impact on political landscape of Central Asia, while cultural and economic exchanges fostered connections between different regions of Central Asia and even between Asia and Europe. Current research on the steppe states of Central Asia in the 17th and 18th centuries often focuses on the connection between their political, trade, and cultural exchanges, and military conquests, territorial changes, and the regional political landscape. However, the unique social structures, divisions and operation mechanisms of political power within these states are also crucial in shaping their diplomatic ideologies, motivations, and policy decisions.

As early as around 1000 BC, the Central Asia steppes' inhabitants had adopted a nomadic lifestyle [1]. Faced with the region's vast expanse and scarce resources, early social groups abandoned settled life. They relied on mobility to obtain the necessary means of production. The nomads substituted grain from farming with livestock as their primary source of sustenance, which led to the development of pastoralism and greatly enhanced mobility with the successful domestication of horses, further sustaining nomadic activities.

The nomadic lifestyle, characterized by frequent migrations, expanded the living territories of the group. However, it also meant that their subsistence was not self-sufficient and heavily depended on the natural environment, keeping the nomadic economy fragile and unstable. These factors contributed to the concept of equal access to land, as land could not be traded as a commodity and could only be legitimately used through distribution by the ruling class or by active conquest.

This also gave rise to the ancient idea of joint rule over the steppes, a mindset that persisted in the modern era. Based on cooperation, this system divided the nomadic lands among multiple rulers, with

each ruler further subdividing the land among lower-level leaders. These co-rulers of the same territory were considered equal, with their cooperation serving mutual strategic interests. They shared specific rights and obligations [2], without focusing on controlling local lords or lower nobles. Rulers tended to be self-sufficient and not reliant on their subjects, exerting control over the lower classes only through occasional taxation. Ensuring the freedom and mobility of social groups was the premise for the ruling class to maintain governance, reflecting the many unstable elements in the nomadic environment. Therefore, the common pursuit of “independence” and “interest” by society is an essential condition for the stable operation of a nomadic society for a long time.

In modern times, faced with the perfection of the Jimi system and tribute system of China in East Asia, the emergence of the Ottoman Empire in West Asia, and Russia’s expansion in Eastern Europe, Central Asian nomadic states developed a typical diplomatic strategy of “multiple loyalties.” At this time, the concept of national sovereignty based on defined borders was still underdeveloped. Instead, land and population were still tied to the ruling class's power, and territorial boundaries remained fluid. This allowed the nomadic states to blur sovereignty, avoid rigid stances, and forge cooperative diplomatic relations with multiple forces without fully submitting to any of them. By utilizing their strategic value, they could gain material benefits and support from various powers while promoting the advancement of their systems and improving their social and economic levels. At the same time, the different internal social composition and power structures of these nomadic states directly impacted the motivations and effectiveness of implementing “multiple loyalties.”

This study, based on qualitative comparative case studies, aims to analyze the causal relationship between the power structures of the Kalmyk Khanate and the Junior jüz of Kazakh Khanate in the 17th and 18th centuries and their foreign policies. By comparing the traditional ideologies, social compositions, power structures, and the division of power within these two states, this research enriches the understanding of the diplomatic activities of modern Central Asian nomadic states. It explains the decline of steppe states’ institutions in modern times.

2. Modern Central Asia Steppe, A Review of National Diplomatic History

2.1. The Kalmyk Khanate: Clearer Hierarchical Power Leading to Proactive Diplomacy

The Kalmyk Khanate was a nomadic state founded in the early 17th century by the Oirat Mongol groups, mainly the Torghut and Dörbet Oirat, who migrated west from the northern Mongolian region through Siberia and eventually settled in the Volga River basin. Before the migration, the Kalmyks had been deeply influenced by the spread of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly the Gelug, among the upper Mongol classes, which shaped the structure of the Kalmyk Khanate’s power after the migration. The Khanate emphasized centralized control, with the ruler’s authority legitimized by the recognition of the Dalai Lama in Tibet. Within the ruling class, the religious group held an exceptionally prominent position, controlling more livestock, land, and knowledge and employing poor residents as serfs [2]. According to Mongolian law codes and the laws issued by Donduk Dashi Khan in the 1740s, Kalmyk secular society was distinctly hierarchical, with clear boundaries between rulers, nobles, commoners, and slaves. Nobles were responsible for managing the commoners in their social unit, known as the “Taish”, and there were designated officials to carry out administrative functions. Commoners were required to pay taxes regularly and provide services to the nobles, reinforcing the social hierarchy and confirming the division of power within society.

This structure gave the Kalmyk Khanate strong military mobilization and organizational capabilities, allowing it to gather thousands of troops for military campaigns and conduct large-scale raids against nearby groups such as the Crimean Khanate, the Don Cossacks, and the Nogais in the eastern region [3]. These military successes significantly reduced the security threats faced by the Khanate. Conquests and plundering brought additional land, livestock, and power, strengthening the Khanate’s overall strength and status in the region. The conquered areas were subjugated and made to pay taxes (yasak), stabilizing the Khanate’s economy.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Kalmyk diplomacy aimed to maximize benefits and support by maintaining a competitive relationship with various powers. The Khanate sought to maintain the delicate balance between multiple sponsors, ensuring its independence and securing profits. The Kalmyks were often used as a valuable military force by their patrons, and when necessary, they could also pose a threat to achieve their objectives. This allowed the Kalmyk khans to gain more significant support from the nobles, thereby enhancing their authority and the cohesion of their rule, stabilizing society, and expanding their military power through more freedom of movement granted by their sponsors.

In the 1720s and 1730s, the Kalmyks cooperated with, pledged allegiance to, and fought against groups such as the Kazakhs, Tatars, and Bashkirs. They conquered the Bashkirs and Nogais, collecting yasak taxes from them. In 1606, the Kalmyk Khanate established diplomatic relations with Russia, treating it as an equal and advantageous sponsor if it was profitable. The Kalmyks' occupation of the Nogai steppes was carried out with Russian permission. Additionally, the Kalmyks, employed as soldiers by Russia, gained valuable gifts and the right to roam freely in the Volga River basin due to their military victories in external campaigns [4]. They retained the power to independently legislate, manage councils (Zargo), and control the judicial system, achieving Russia's goal of maintaining divisions among the Oirats and using Kalmyk power to balance the Central Asia-Siberia region and create a buffer zone between Russia and the Qing Dynasty. Meanwhile, the Kalmyk Khanate, through a mix of cooperation and threats, successfully maintained its independence and leveraged the vast Russian market, leading to a rapid increase in population and followers. This laid the foundation for the peak of the Kalmyk Khanate's comprehensive national strength under the rule of Ayuki Khan after 1670.

However, after the mid-17th century, Ayuki Khan's efforts to expand his influence and strengthen central power clashed with the nomadic ideal of preserving group freedom and decision-making, causing resentment among his subjects. The tendency of nobles to seek separation became increasingly apparent, and there was an outflow of commoners. A series of conflicts intensified after Ayuki Khan died in 1724, culminating in a succession struggle among his descendants. By the time Donduk-Dashi Khan ascended to the throne in 1741 with Russian support, the legitimacy of the Kalmyk Khan's authority had shifted from Tibet to Russia. Donduk-Dashi's multiple requests for Russian intervention to suppress noble rebellion resulted in the loss of the Khanate's independent judicial authority, a decline in the Khan's prestige, and increased dependence on Russian decisions. The Kalmyk Khanate became increasingly unstable, with growing poverty, internal chaos, and the mass flight of its population.

By the time of the Russo-Turkish War (1768-1774), Russia's heavy conscription demands on the Kalmyks completely disrupted the balance between the Kalmyk society's pursuit of "independence" and "interest." Russia no longer viewed the Kalmyks as collaborators but as subjects. Frequent participation in military actions brought no benefits to the Khanate; only population decline and social disruption eroded its independence and access to the free Central Asian market. In 1771, Ubashi Khan led the Torgut tribe of the Kalmyk Khanate on a migration back to the Dzungar lands, which the Qing Dynasty had conquered. Following this, Catherine II of Russia abolished the Kalmyk Khanate's territorial division, and the Durbets, who did not migrate, gradually assimilated into Russian society.

2.2. The Junior jüz of Kazakh Khanate: Loose Social Structure Leading to Passive Diplomacy

The Kazakh Khanate was formed in the late 15th century by the descendants of Bukai Timur, the thirteenth son of Jochi, who, after defeating the Shiban family controlling the Uzbek Khanate, united various local tribes to establish a new state [5]. The formation of the Khanate and its multi-ethnic structure determined the state's weak centralization and fluidity of power. Apart from the noble ruling class, which held hereditary titles as "White Bones," the titles of local nobles referred to as "Black Bones" were unclear and not tied to any individual's lifetime [2]. This meant that the ruling class did not exist as a fixed hierarchy.

Kazakh society emphasized the protection of individual freedom, with an economic relationship between nobles and commoners close to mutual benefit. This limited the Khan's direct control over lower social groups, as the ruler's authority stemmed primarily from the Borjigin lineage and the support of followers rather than from systematic administrative control. Thus, the Khanate's mechanisms for reward and punishment could not extend effectively to lower levels of society.

The loose social structure, combined with the long-term absence of a strong Khan following the death of Kasym Khan in 1623, weakened the Kazakh Khanate's military mobilization capabilities. In the 1640s, the rise of the Jungars, who targeted the Kazakhs as a strategic goal, seriously threatened the Kazakh Khanate's survival. After the death of Tauke Khan, the Jungar invasions led to the Great Disaster of Aktaban Shubyryndy, which caused the complete fragmentation of the Kazakh Khanate's three "Jüz". This division also laid the foundation for the "tribal politics" issue [6] and regional differentiation [7] that persists in modern Kazakhstan.

Faced with the Dzungar threat, the three Jüz acted independently to seek external support. Among them, the westernmost Jüz, the Junior Jüz, also faced pressure from the Kalmyks and Bashkirs in the west. Maintaining peace with surrounding ethnic groups and ensuring survival became Junior Jüz's primary goal. This situation demanded internal strength, but the current situation was insufficient. The khans of the Junior Jüz sought to centralize power to gain control over resources and strengthen their military and economic capabilities. However, the ruling khans, relying solely on personal influence and unilateral leadership, could not reverse the chaos and devastation that the Kazakh society had suffered for nearly two decades due to the Great Disaster of Aktaban Shubyryndy.

To acquire political support and material resources quickly, the Junior Jüz's khan, Abulkhair, turned to Russia for protection. In 1723, when the Dzungars controlled the Senior and Middle Jüz, Abulkhair Khan unilaterally pledged allegiance to Russian Empress Anna Ioannovna in 1731 without consulting other Kazakh leaders [8]. This decision suppressed the independence needs of certain nobles and triggered a desire for rebellion among some groups.

The Kazakh society's inability to balance its dual pursuit of "independence" and "interests" was due to its lack of internal cohesion and weak national strength. On the one hand, seeking loyalty to external powers diminished the mobility and flexibility of the nomadic society, leading to internal noble unrest that was difficult to control. On the other hand, if the Kazakhs sought to maintain their independence, they would lose the economic and diplomatic support needed for survival.

The internal instability of Kazakh society, with unclear social hierarchies and unstable generational transitions, made it difficult for Russia to intervene and control Kazakh affairs through its existing institutions. This imbalance created opportunities for Russia to exploit internal conflicts within the Junior Jüz between pro-Russian and conservative factions. Russia gradually increased its interference by exposing the weaknesses in the Junior Jüz's power structure [2].

After Abul Khair Khan was assassinated by Barak in 1748, the question of the legitimacy of the khanate arose. Russia successfully intervened and gained the power to recognize the legitimacy of the Khanate's leadership. Abul Khair Khan's son, Nurali Khan, who ascended to the throne with the approval of Empress Elizabeth I, significantly increased his reliance on Russian decisions. He sent many Kazakh nobles' sons to Russia as hostages, increasing Russia's influence on Kazakh affairs. During the Pugachev Rebellion, the Little Horde, after initially collaborating with the Bashkirs to support Pugachev, ultimately suppressed the uprising to prove their loyalty to Russia.

Nurali Khan's attempt to pledge allegiance to the Qing Dynasty in 1762 angered Russia. With increasing pressure on Kazakh lands, Russia began incorporating Kazakh territories into its border administrative system. By building fortresses, providing residences for nobles, and distributing food, Russia encouraged the sedentary settlement of the Kazakh people, who were already suffering from a severe shortage of production materials. Nurali Khan failed to regain control of the important winter pastures near the Syr Darya River. Domestically, a powerful anti-Russian faction led by Syrym emerged, leading to several uprisings at the end of the 18th century.

From 1780 onwards, Catherine II began introducing the Russian border administrative system into the Junior Jüz, suppressing Kazakh autonomy by imposing Russian laws and judicial institutions and

delaying the selection of khans [9]. By the 19th century, Little Horde's pursuit of "independence" and "interests" had collapsed: its social system had come under significant Russian control, and internal disarray prevented independent decision-making. The conditions necessary for the operation of a nomadic society could no longer be sustained, and the essence of the Junior Jüz had been fundamentally altered by a century of foreign diplomatic activities [10].

3. Conclusion

This paper reviews the diplomatic history of the Kalmyk Khanate and the Junior Jüz of Kazakh Khanate in the 17th and 18th centuries, comparing the traditional ideologies, social compositions, power structures, and divisions of power in the two Central Asian nomadic states. The research reveals that the simultaneous pursuit of "interests" and "independence," as essential conditions for the stable operation of nomadic societies, was shaped by the internal social structure and the division and operation of power in these states. The internal cohesion formed by these power structures influenced the military strength of the states, the legitimacy of the rulers' authority, and the orientation of social needs. In turn, these factors shaped the diplomatic ideologies and policies of the respective states. This research holds significant value for exploring the formation of diplomatic motivations and the characteristics of foreign policy activities among modern steppe states. Additionally, the long-lasting impact of the ancient idea of joint rule over the steppes and the severe economic imbalance with surrounding states in modern times further supports the inevitability of the decline of the steppe societies' systems. Furthermore, the exploration of the social structure of these steppe states can provide insights into modern-day Central Asian social phenomena, such as the "tribal politics" issue in Kazakhstan.

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